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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 TEGUCIGALPA 001825

SIPDIS

STATE FOR WHA/EPSC, WHA/PPC, AND WHA/CEN
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E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: HONDURAS CSI MOVING AHEAD

REF: A) TEGUCIGALPA 646

1. Following a week-long visit to review progress, a Department of Homeland Security (DHS/CBP) team reports that GOH support for the Container Security Initiative (CSI) program remains strong and preparations at Puerto Cortes continue to move forward. Team leader Mark Reich and Jacob Aguilar briefed EconChief on 19 August, expressing great satisfaction with the excellent responsiveness of the GOH leadership during the visit. The GOH "bent over backwards" for the team, and any issues that needed to be resolved were referred to the capital and "often fixed within a half an hour." Office space within the port for the future CSI resident team is nearing completion.

2. Personnel: Reich said that at this rate, a CSI resident team of five (one customs analyst, three customs officers, and one Special Agent) could be on the ground as soon as November. Any permanent placements in-country will require completion of the NSDD 38 process in Washington, but Reich indicated that once the program is ready to begin, DHS would likely approve sending a TDY team until the permanent positions are approved. In the meantime, DHS will also be sending an administrative expert to begin preparing for ICASS and procurement issues.

3. Critical Issues at the Port: During its visit, the team noted a number of shortcomings at the port, some of which must be addressed for the CSI program to take effect, other which are not required but would improve port operations. In the former category, the team noted the need for better secure storage of containers once they have been inspected but before they are loaded onto ships bound for the U.S., to prevent any contamination. For similar reasons, a standard operating procedure must be crafted that grants Honduran law enforcement access to containers prior to inspections, but that places inspected and sealed containers off-limits to being re-opened.

4. Other Issues at the Port: Other items, such as chaotic traffic patterns, are not critical to CSI implementation, but are sure to become a headache for all involved once the GOH fully implements its planned 100 percent gamma-ray scanning of all containerized traffic. That program is a GOH Customs initiative, intended to crack down on smuggling, and not a CSI requirement (though CSI does require access on an as-needed basis to non-intrusive inspection equipment). The team noted that there is a lack of technical skills within the GOH customs inspectors responsible for reviewing these scanned images. Without having manifest lists on hand or any training in image interpretation, these officials know neither what they are seeing nor what they should be seeing in a given container. To remedy this, the DHS team is considering bringing a capacity building team to the port during the next two months to conduct basic customs inspection techniques training.

5. Some U.S. and Honduran textile factories ("maquilas") utilizing this port have expressed concerns that their goods now take an extra day to clear Honduran customs. They claim that bottlenecks in the scanning process are exacerbated when technicians are untrained. This is especially important to companies relying upon geographic proximity to the United States as a competitive advantage. DHS/CBP officials note, however, that a successful CSI program will allow inspected and sealed containers to avoid delays of up to three days in U.S. ports while awaiting CBP inspections there. Thus, while it might cost a day more in Puerto Cortes, overall the CSI program should save exporters valuable time in reaching their final market in the U.S.

6. Comment: Comment: Post is encouraged by the overall positive assessment of the CSI team and the excellent cooperation offered by the GOH. Our primary concern is that custom officials receive sufficient training to enable them to operate the new equipment and systems associated with the CSI program. We also acknowledge concerns about vulnerabilities at the port, including allegations of corruption. The presence of CSI officers could and should influence GOH customs officers to perform in a more

professional and competent manner. End Comment.

17. The visiting DHS team did not have an opportunity to clear this cable.

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